

A detailed medieval manuscript illustration. In the upper left, a woman labeled 'FLORA' holds a golden vase with blue flowers. In the upper right, a cherub and a woman are depicted. The lower left shows a man in a fur-trimmed robe and a crown. The lower right features a woman in a yellow dress and a white headscarf, standing next to a horse. The background is a lush garden with trees and a small building.

FLORA

GARDEN & NATURE

IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

DUMBARTON OAKS



To speak of “garden” and “nature” in the medieval world is to consider in the broadest terms how human beings have lived surrounded by and in constant relationship with the natural environment.

This exhibition booklet presents snapshots of medieval gardens in a global comparative framework, drawing attention to the varied expressions of garden culture in the research areas represented at Dumbarton Oaks. In addition, this booklet includes selected objects from the museum galleries that depict medieval peoples' relationship to gardens and nature through their art.

GARDEN & NATURE

IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

Hant's rezes conqios lantabl
 Et sus deplutres redoubte
 Pour son quinc faine
 Et enleus vater
 Hercules hiet de a aus
 Par moop hnoy valiant dame
 Et de anclepres lantabl
 Ria ne conqiosla que dantabl



GARDEN & NATURE IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection
2023

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Contents

Garden and Nature	6
Gardens in the Global Middle Ages	16
Gardens and Nature in Art	48
Dumbarton Oaks and European Gardens	66
Bibliography	74
Photography Captions and Credits	76
Acknowledgments	79
INSIDE COVERS:	
Map of Museum	
Map of Gardens	



Garden and Nature

Rong Huang



To speak of “garden” and “nature” in the medieval world is to consider in the broadest terms how human beings have lived surrounded by and in constant relationship with the natural environment.

This exhibition booklet presents snapshots of medieval gardens in a global comparative framework, drawing attention to the varied expressions of garden culture in the research areas represented at Dumbarton Oaks. In addition, this booklet includes selected objects from the museum galleries that build on the theme of how medieval people expressed their relationship to gardens and nature through art.

Gardens are often considered to be the most sophisticated and refined forms of landscape architecture. They can be conceptualized not only as physical spaces but also through their representation in religious texts, literary works, and visual depictions. In a metaphorical sense, the microcosm of a garden has often been understood as a concentrated representation of the macrocosm. Gardens managed and owned by ruling elites, such as the Philopation and the Aretai in Constantinople, for example, served as locations for hunting and held animals and plants drawn from local as well as foreign locales.



Fig. 01

Their grand size and the diversity of species in them served to symbolically exhibit the ruler's hegemony over the natural world. The emperor who imposed peace and order over nature through human engineering, as his pleasure garden vividly showed, would likewise manage his empire and his people skillfully. These themes were not limited to Byzantium, however: in the bathhouse at Khirbat al-Mafjar, an early eighth century CE Umayyad royal palace, a mosaic depicting gently grazing gazelles and a lion attacking a gazelle on either side of a fruit tree clearly demonstrates imperial dominance over nature in both peace and war. **(Fig. 01)**



Fig. 02

Medieval gardens not only served symbolic functions in expressing political might; they also conveyed metaphorical connotations in Christian religious contexts. The biblical story of humanity begins in a garden, making it an important device in many medieval narratives. Medieval hagiographies—biographies of saints—are filled with legends about the physical and spiritual transformation of a remote and inaccessible wilderness into a domesticated and perfected garden. St. Anthony the Great, the model of all the Christian ascetics, was said to have created a garden in the barren desert of Egypt, and, after his miraculous command, no wild animals came to harm the holy man's plants. Stories like these reveal that, from the ancient to the medieval period, a general change took place in people's attitudes toward nature: a shift from openly appreciating and embracing nature's beauty and autonomy to viewing untamed nature as corrupt, dangerous, and full of demons, thus in constant need of control and purification by the saints and the church.

In literary and visual works, gardens may connote seclusion, privacy, and safety. Scenarios from medieval European romances, such as the *Decameron* and others, portray an enclosed garden (*hortus conclusus*), where the female protagonist dwells and which the suitor must enter. Gardens serve as a backdrop for refined activities, as a theater for the love story to unfold in Persianate poetry and visual depictions. In these contexts garden plants even behave like the couple in love, with branches embracing and leaves touching each other. (Fig. 02) Quite frequently, descriptions of the garden and the female characters are intertwined, using elaborate imageries of plants to create an erotic atmosphere, closely linked with female sexuality and desire. Such connections appear not only in literature, but also in religious traditions. One prominent example would be the Virgin Mary, who is often portrayed as the hostess of a blooming garden representing paradise, welcoming the faithful to visit and receive salvation. Bringing these themes together, the captured unicorn at the center of the narrative of the *Unicorn Tapestries* might be viewed, on the one hand, as an allegorical symbol for Christ, while also evoking connotations of fecundity, protection, and enclosure drawing from traditions associated with sexuality and marriage. (Fig. 03)

Across cultures, gardens also remind the visitors of the passage of time, both real and imagined. Gardens exist, grow, and change through the seasons. Being in a garden, we perceive multiple layers of time. Immediately, we experience the natural process of growing, withering, and reviving. A garden's vitality points to the future, as well as a certain degree of change and unpredictability that has the ability to trigger in visitors new ideas and perspectives. But gardens

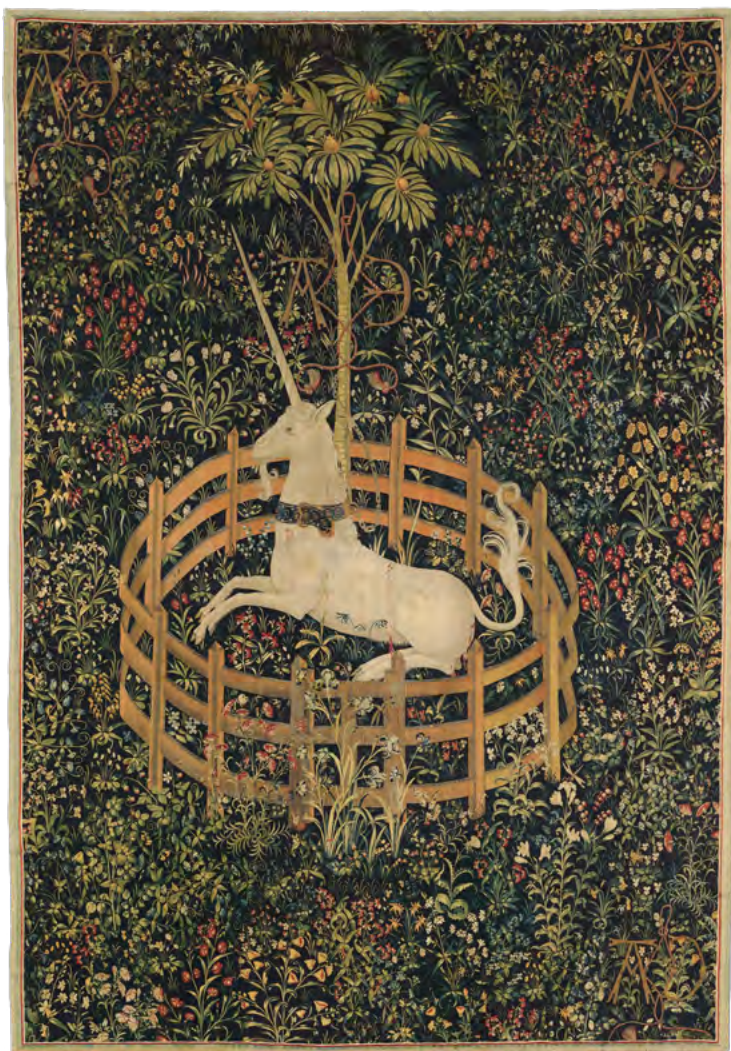


Fig. 03



Fig. 04

also function as places of memory, bearing traces of nostalgia, recollection, and idealized time. Depictions of exquisite buildings and gardens in the mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus, for example, evoke the eternity of paradise that operates outside of human existence. **(Fig. 04)**

These general observations apply equally to the varied cultures represented in the exhibition *Garden and Nature in the Medieval World*. The definition of garden is enriched and complicated when viewing gardens in a cross-cultural framework. For example, medieval Europe long felt the influence of Persian and Islamic styles of garden construction. In fact, the Greek word *paradeisos* (παράδεισος), source of the English word “paradise,” was borrowed from the Old Persian word *pairidaēza*, meaning “enclosed park or pleasure ground.” As another example, the naturalistic landscape in British garden design that gained popularity from the eighteenth century was deeply indebted to the Chinese appreciation of irregularity and asymmetry. **(Fig. 05)**


These examples illuminate how gardens, as representative forms of landscape, reflect the tension and the dynamics between human beings and their environment. We define ourselves in this close and ever-changing relationship with our surroundings. Thus we visit and revisit our gardens, bringing new ways to understand and appreciate their beauty and complexity each time, leaving them with fresh inspirations about who we are and how to live meaningfully with what surrounds us. 



Fig. 05

Fig. 01: Mosaic pavement with a lion and gazelle, from the Reception Hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar, Jericho, West Bank, Palestinian Territories, 724–43 or 743–46 CE

Fig. 02: *Prince in a Garden Courtyard*, 1525–30 CE, Watercolor, ink, gold, and silver on paper, 8 ½ × 4 ¾ in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1911, 11.39.1

Fig. 03: *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden*, from the Unicorn Tapestries, 1495–1505, wool warp with wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts, 144 7/8 × 99 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr, 1939, 39.80.6

Fig. 04: Courtyard mosaics, Great Mosque of Damascus, Syria, eighth century CE

Fig. 05: *Two Magpies Singing*, Chung-Mei Ch'en, ca. 1279–1368 CE (or later), ink on silk, 13 × 13 in., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, House Collection, HC.P.1924.01.(WC)



Gardens in the Global Middle Ages

Elizabeth Dospěl Williams



The following essays sketch an impressionistic history of medieval gardens in the periods represented in the Collections and Study Programs at Dumbarton Oaks, drawing out similarities and differences in how people have approached nature over the centuries and across geographic expanse.

Indeed, we find many repeating themes in the authors' overviews of medieval garden cultures. In the most general sense, gardens were practical places for growing and managing crops intended for the healthful nourishment of humans and animals alike. Similarly, gardens served as platforms for the expression of elites' brute power and symbolic mastery over natural forces, particularly in the form of palace gardens in many cultures and periods. Gardens' literary connotations also extend across cultures, where they appear not only as settings for romantic narratives or poetry, but also as places for theatrical performance and elegant entertainment.

Appreciation for the similarity between gardens over a vast geographic and chronological expanse, however, must be tempered with sensitivity to their specificities. Europeans encountering the landscapes of the Americas, for example, at times failed to understand (or forcefully ignored) that the land was cultivated, instead viewing Indigenous gardens as wilderness for colonial exploitation. Such disconnect in worldview underscores the divergent ways premodern peoples interacted with their environments and understood their place in the world. Medieval gardens might thus be seen as charged expressions of humankind's dominance over nature or as idealized settings for dearly held beliefs about the natural world, in ways that are at once familiar and strange to us. These many possibilities—in their infinitely varied manifestations across space and time—reflect diverse conceptual frameworks relevant as much to our understanding of the medieval past, as to our own interactions with the environment today. ∞

Gardens in Byzantium

Nikos D. Kontogiannis

A Byzantine garden was experienced and understood very differently than today: considered as a wonder, it could be envisaged through a viewpoint practical and recreational, sacred and spiritual, artistic and aesthetic, or even political and historical. It was, therefore, a complex and multilayered cultural concept. These features were layered invariably and were evoked at different places and times by different authors and for different audiences and purposes. Drawing from long Greek and Roman traditions, Byzantine gardens became one of the most treasured creations the Empire shared with its contemporaries and descendants.

The main conceptual feature of such gardens was control over nature. The walls, buildings, sculptures, water fountains and ponds, and imported exotic animals attested to the subjugation of natural elements and the beauty in man-made symmetry and geometry. The prototype to uphold stemmed from the image of the primordial Garden of Eden, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the promised Paradise. It was perpetuated in scriptural and literary depictions and recorded in prose, poetry, and images; the latter circulating through manuscripts, wall paintings, mosaics, fabrics, and various other media. Simple depictions of trees and animals, often drinking from fountains, acquired symbolic meanings, and were seen fit to decorate churches and palaces. (**Fig. 06**)

In order to create these images, Byzantine artists and intellectuals must have turned to actual examples. We can retrace gardens



Fig. 06

(vegetable, botanical, flower, orchard, vineyard, and so on) through descriptions, metaphors, similes, tropes, and sporadic mentions in poems, sermons, encomia, romances, and histories. They show familiarity with actual everyday practices and reflect a sustainable and well thought out use of the natural resources both in civic and rural environments. Many of these practices were recorded in a very popular tenth-century gardening-agricultural handbook (known as *geoponika*), compiled at the order of emperor Constantine VII. (Fig. 07) Medicinal plants and herbs were beautifully illustrated in works such as the *De Materia Medica* of Dioskorides. (Fig. 08, Fig. 09)

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that a landscaped garden destined for the pleasure of its owners was deemed essential for all aristocratic households, as well as for the pious foundations created by elite members of society. In the restricted space of Byzantine cities, where both land and the provision of water were sought-after luxuries, the elite and imperial domains (and indeed all major churches) were embellished with designed gardens. The special relation between royal power and a well-arranged landscape, common in all Mediterranean dynasties, reached its pinnacle in Byzantium; it was a visible reflection of God's Regent – creating, beautifying, and administering a new Eden on Earth. Hunting wild animals in the forests around Constantinople, but also preserving exotic species in menageries, were activities deemed worthy of the emperor as ruler and regulator of the natural world.

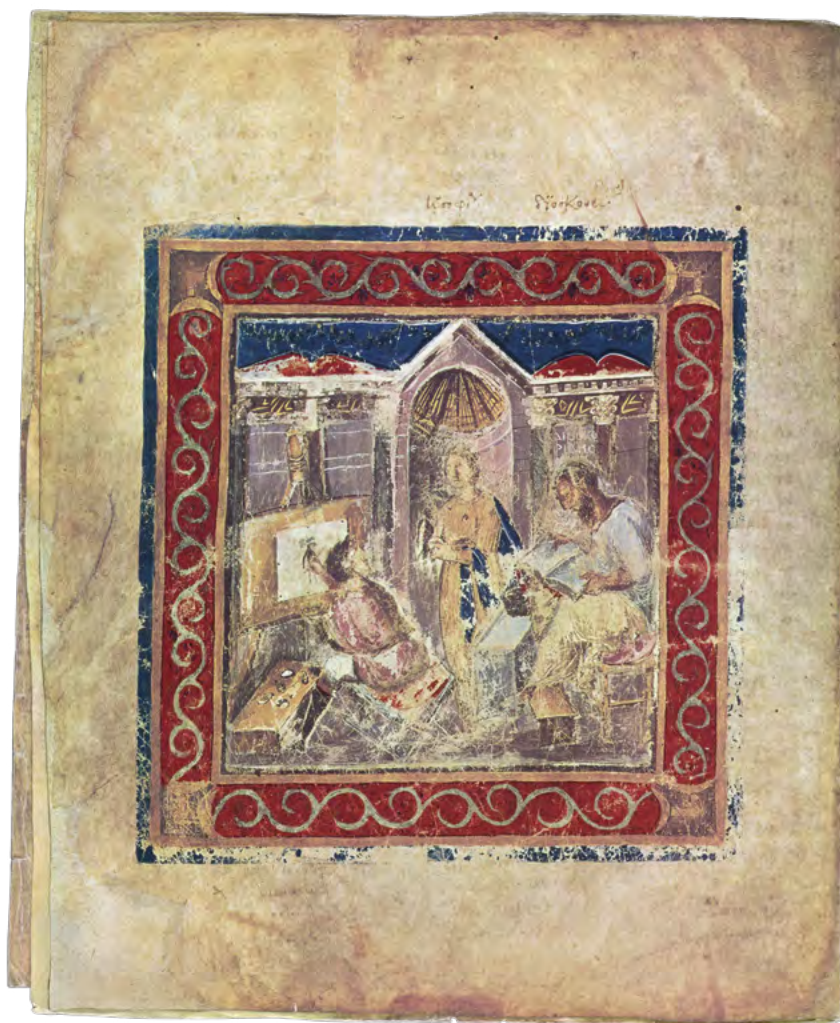


Fig. 08

In the end, well-ordained gardens were an integral part of Byzantine life, appreciated for all their sensorial and metaphysical attributes. This was beautifully expressed in the concept of the garden associated with Virgin Mary (Theotokos). One cannot but admire how a self-sufficient and sustainable way of life was elevated to an ideal. It comes as no surprise that the tenth century monastic republic of Mt. Athos still styles itself today as “the garden of the Theotokos.” 🌿



Fig. 09

Fig. 06: Mosaic depicting the Annunciation of Virgin's Birth to St. Anne, taking place in a garden, early fourteenth century CE, Chora Monastery, Istanbul, Turkey

Fig. 07: *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, with vineyard laborers (below), eleventh century CE, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Gr. 74, fol. 39v

Fig. 08: An artist drawing a mandrake held by a personification of Intelligence, prefatory illustration from Dioskorides' *De Materia Medica*, early sixth century CE, Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Med. Gr. 1, fol. 5v

Fig. 09: Sweet violet (*Viola odorata*), illustration from Dioskorides' *De Materia Medica*, early sixth century CE, Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Med. Gr. 1, fol. 148v

Gardens in the Americas

Noa Corcoran-Tadd & Frauke Sachse



We must not forget the gardens of flowers and sweet-scented trees, and the many kinds that there were of them, and the arrangement of them and the walks, and the ponds and tanks of fresh water where the water entered at one end and flowed out at the other; and the baths which he had there, and the variety of small birds that nested in the branches, and the medicinal and useful herbs that were in the gardens. It was a wonder to see, and to take care of it there were many gardeners. Everything was made in masonry and well cemented, baths and walks and closets, and apartments like summer houses where they danced and sang. There was as much to be seen in these gardens as there was everywhere else, and we could not tire of witnessing his great power.”

— Bernal Díaz del Castillo 1568, ch. XCI [trans. Maudslay 1910]

The Ancient Americas were characterized by a tremendous level of ecological, cultural, and political diversity. Farmers across the Americas—from the US Southwest and Mesoamerica to Amazonia



Fig. 10

and the Andes—had developed resilient forms of agriculture and horticulture adapted to specific regional conditions, often shaping the landscape with complex systems of irrigation, terracing, or raised fields. The closest analogs to the medieval gardens of Europe—as loci of food production, the cultivation of herbs, and recreation—were the courtly landscapes in and around the capitals of the Aztec/Mexica and Inca empires at sites like Huaxtepec, Texcotzingo, Tipón, and Moray. (**Fig. 10**)

The early Spanish chroniclers marveled at the luscious and beautiful gardens across the Valley of Mexico, with plentiful kinds of trees and flowers as well as freshwater ponds, the air filled with wonderful odors and the song of birds. Adjacent to his palace in the capital city of Tenochtitlan, Moctezuma II's zoological garden held a collection of wild animals and exotic plants, which drew upon and displayed the regional riches of the expanding empire. Called *xochitla* ("flower places" or "flower fields"), such spaces were likely reserved for the elites, who controlled the cultivation of specific plants—both herbs and flowers—for consumption and use in offering ceremonies. (**Fig. 11**)

The Inca capital of Cuzco was similarly surrounded by numerous royal estates with palatial compounds, monumental agricultural terraces, elaborate waterworks, and pasturelands. As well as providing subsistence for large elite households, such estates also



Fig. 12





Fig. 13

Yet early European observers frequently struggled to understand the character of the Indigenous shaping of American landscapes, mistakenly or intentionally misconstruing transformed environments as “pristine” examples of a New World Eden. In many parts of the Americas, there was often a substantial gap between how Indigenous inhabitants and European settlers understood the categories of garden, field, and forest. The traditional system of *milpa* agriculture (Nahuatl for “field”) in Mesoamerica integrates maize cultivation with the planting of other crops and flowers, forming an ecological equilibrium. Such *milpa* fields and undisturbed ancestral groves could be integrated into the urban fabric, confounding assumptions about a simple divide between town and countryside. Practices of tree cultivation in the tropical lowlands—particularly in Amazonia—further complicated divisions between the wild and the domestic, with centuries of tree clearance and orchard planting reshaping the composition of forests and soils across large areas.

Following the European invasions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the “flower fields” of central Mexico and royal estates of the Inca would no longer flourish. (Fig. 14) Yet much of this horticultural knowledge was not lost, with the humble *milpa* systems and the human-shaped biodiversity of Amazonia remaining vital Ancient American legacies for the communities of today. 🌀



Fig. 14

Fig. 10: Map of Huaxtepec (Morelos, Mexico), 1580 CE, watercolor map, 85 × 62 cm, Benson Latin American Collection (The University of Texas at Austin), JGI XXIV-3

Fig. 11: Members of the Aztec/Mexica elite harvesting and arranging flowers, Florentine Codex by Bernardino de Sahagún and collaborators, 1577 CE, ink on paper, 9 × 9 cm (detail), Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Book 11, fol. 198v

Fig. 12: Monumental terraces at the Inca site of Moray, 1400-1532 CE, Cuzco, Peru

Fig. 13: Fountain at the Inca estate of Tipón, 1400-1532 CE, Cuzco, Peru

Fig. 14: Medicinal plants from central Mexico with their names in Nahuatl, watercolor reproduction of the Aztec/Mexica herbal known as the Badianus Manuscript (Codex Barberini, Latin 241), 1552 CE (original), 18 × 21 cm, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, RBR N-2-3, 6 [i.e. 69]

Gardens in the Islamicate World

Micah Budway

The tradition of Islamic gardens is fundamentally defined by the mention of these oases as earthly manifestations of heavenly paradise (*Al-Jannah*) throughout the Qur'an. In the physical realm, the layout of Islamic gardens in terms of the placement of pavilions and other structures demonstrates they were intended as spaces of relaxation, reflection, and meditation. Few gardens from the early Islamic period still survive today, however, with rare but spectacular examples that include the palace and garden complex of Alhambra in Granada, Andalusia, Spain, and La Zisa in Palermo, Sicily. (**Fig. 15, Fig. 16**) In these gardens, water features and placements of flowers and fauna evoke physical beauty while also reflecting the promised afterlife. While these gardens share similar features across the Muslim world, communities' cultural values necessarily impacted their engagement with religious tradition and how they subsequently envisioned an Islamic garden. Therefore, it is important to examine specific regional practices to better understand how gardens are featured in life around the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

For example, gardens are prominent in the Persianate literary tradition, especially in works by Nezami (1141–1209 CE), Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273 CE), and Hafez (1325–1390 CE). Nezami's poetry expresses that the garden is a setting for allegorical action and imagery, particularly in *Haft Paykar*, where the Sassanid king, Bahram Gur, travels to seven gardens to spend time with his wives, achieve



Fig. 15

enlightenment, and experience romantic love. Jalal al-Din Rumi's *ghazals*, or poetic verses, sing praises of the garden in spring and its ability to encapsulate Divine revelation and spiritual rebirth. He evokes the object of the rose as a symbol of the perennial nature of Divine love. Hafez's poems present the garden as a setting for scholarship, political ceremony, and devotion. Throughout Hafez's work, the gardener is seen as the individual of authority, who defines this space as one for learning. The cypress is often employed in these poems as a metaphor for the prince dedicated to his subjects,

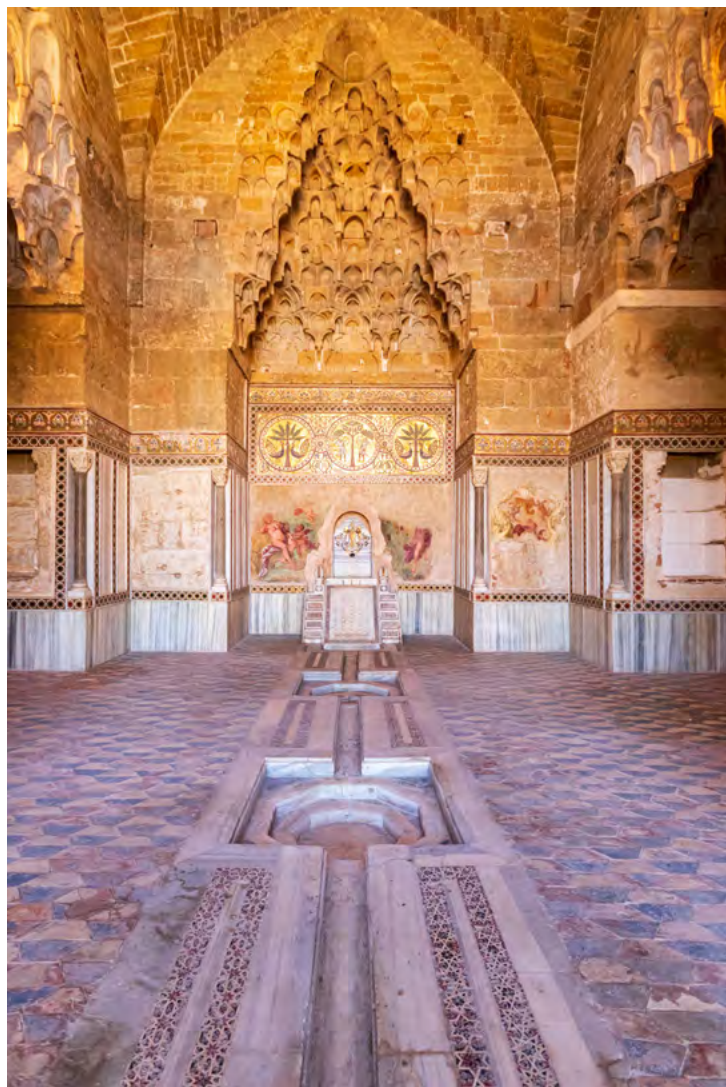


Fig. 16

who flourish beneath his attention and care. These examples draw attention to many layers of aesthetic, political, literary, and religious connotations conveyed in descriptions of gardens in Persianate poetry.

Alongside their metaphorical importance in the literary traditions, gardens played a substantial role during the Timurid Period (1370–1507 CE), particularly in Samarqand, designated as the dynasty's capital during the reigns of Timur (1370–1405 CE) and Ulugbek (1409–1449 CE). Historians' and scholars' comprehensions of Timur's beloved *chahar bagh*, the Persian word for a quadrilateral garden layout, are derived from accounts of European travelers to the city, such as Ruy González de Clavijo (d. 1412 CE). Clavijo was the Castilian ambassador of Henry III to the Court of Timur. He travelled to Samarqand in 1403 CE and published his findings and descriptions of the Turco-Mongol ruler's gardens. His account remarks on the beauty of Samarqand's *chahar bagh* and recounts how these spaces were used as settings for political ceremonies, including those welcoming foreign dignitaries like Clavijo.

Today none of Samarqand's fantastic medieval gardens survive. But Abd-Allah Hatefi's *Zafarnama*, an epic chronicle of Timur's legacy, offers visual evidence and points to gardens' political implications. For example, an illustrated version of the account known as the Baltimore *Zafarnama* includes a depiction of Timur's ascension to the throne set in a garden and surrounded by *amirs* and *shayks*, that is to say, both princes and religious leaders. (Fig. 17) With this ceremony, Timur became ruler of the Chagatai Khanate, and established his connection as a descendant of the Mongol ruler, Genghis Khan. The inclusion of a tent and pavilion in the right folio is a meaningful detail; by integrating features of nomadic Turco-Mongol lifestyle into the fixed world of the Persianate *chahar bagh*, Timur laid claim to both of these major cultural traditions in order to legitimize his rule.

Visual and textual portrayals of traditions like these underline the range of meanings associated with gardens in the Persianate world. While gardens were spaces of spiritual enlightenment and relaxation as highlighted throughout the works of Nezami, Hafez, and Rumi, their practical usage during the Timurid period showcased their role as settings for political and social events. The dimensions of Islamic gardens, therefore, must be seen beyond the religious context to include examples that highlight their importance in the realm of politics and cultural practices. ❧



Fig. 17



459

Fig. 15: Alhambra garden complex, early fourteenth century CE, Granada, Spain

Fig. 16: Castello della Zisa, twelfth century CE, Palermo, Sicily

Fig. 17: Zafarnama of Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi, copied ca. 1467-68 CE, illustrations by Bihzad, 1480 CE, John Work Garrett Library, John Hopkins University, [no shelf number], fol. 82v-83r

Gardens in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

Anatole Tchikine

In medieval Christian imagination, gardens conveyed the idea of Paradise in a tangible form. The trauma of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden—a metaphorical loss of innocence as previous unity with nature—became translated into a teleological script in which the harshness of divine punishment bore the promise of future salvation. Nowhere else is this message made more explicit than in the eleventh-century bronze doors of Hildesheim Cathedral in Lower Saxony, where the descending narrative of the Fall on the left is paired with the upward story of human redemption on the right. (**Fig. 18**) Beginning with Adam and Eve in the Terrestrial Paradise and progressing down and then up, the biblical sequence ends directly opposite in another garden scene, *Noli me tangere*, where Christ disguised as a humble gardener reveals himself to Magdalene. Although a relatively minor episode—one of Christ's appearances to his followers after the Resurrection—this event, enacted among the stylized vegetal sprouts of a paradisiacal setting, acquires a momentous significance here, linking the Old and New Testaments. By visually completing the cycle of betrayal, banishment, and sacrifice, it marks the eventual return to Eden as an unambiguous sign of divine forgiveness.

Such religious symbolism also permeated the design of medieval cloister gardens, open rectangular spaces enclosed by four ambulatories. These places of tranquil repose and meditation were a relatively new addition to monastic architecture, unknown to the early followers of



Fig. 18

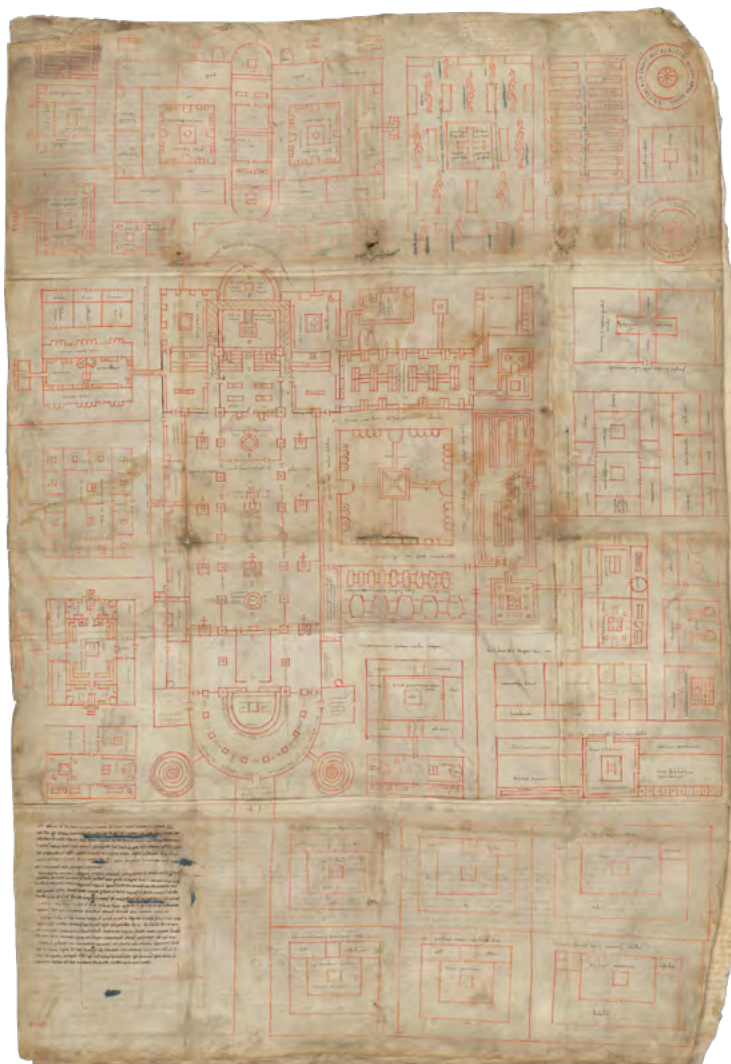


Fig. 19

the Rule of Saint Benedict. Although derived from the ancient atria, cloisters imbued this traditional form with a distinctly Christian meaning. A protected, walled space was suggestive of chastity and maidenhood and thus associated with the Virgin, while a well or cistern in the center alluded to the Edenic spring, a symbol of purification, which gave origin to the Four Rivers of Paradise. More utilitarian

were apothecary gardens, as shown in the upper left corner of the ninth-century plan of the Benedictine monastery of Saint Gall in Switzerland. **(Fig. 19)** Characterized by a simple layout with parallel rows of herbs and shrubs (such as rosemary, sage, basil, and mint), they supplied monastic dispensaries, perpetuating the ancient tradition of Galenic medicine based on a belief in the healing powers of plants.

In the secular context, the garden was given a more sensuous interpretation. While borrowing the enclosed form of the monastic *hortus conclusus*, it became a conventional spot for social gatherings accompanied by music and singing and a refuge for courting couples. This domain of perpetual spring represented a *locus amoenus*, an exclusive abode of sensory delight and amorous pleasure, where humans came into contact with nature as a source of physical and mental revitalization. For example, a late fifteenth-century illustration accompanying the French medieval poem *Roman de la Rose*, an allegorical dream journey in search of unattainable love, shows a private garden surrounded by crenellated walls with a prominent entrance gate. **(Fig. 20)** Behind this forbidding exterior, the visitor finds a delightful setting with turf benches, lavender beds, trellised white and red roses, and various orchard trees. A doorway in a latticed screen leads to a lush meadow with a fountain in the middle, its water divided into multiple streams to evoke the sensations of soothing sound and cooling spray.


Renaissance humanism, with its longing for the lost world of antiquity, added an antiquarian nostalgia to this timeless vision of organized nature. The use of gardens for the display of collections of antique sculpture made these spaces prestigious loci of elite self-fashioning. While retaining the medieval amenities of shady arbors and trellised walks, Renaissance designers revived many inventions described by ancient authors, such as kinetic automata and topiary work. Although these devices had already featured in earlier aristocratic estates, notably the fourteenth-century park at Hesdin in the north-east of France, the idea of art coming to the aid of nature became a leitmotif of the new age. In keeping with this conceit, fountains of the Cinquecento Italian villas, with their complex narrative programs and sophisticated water display, sought to appeal to the intellect as much as the senses. Another common feature were grottos, the abodes of refreshing coolness conceived as gateways into the hidden subterranean world of lost civilizations, geological processes, and mineral riches. A reminder of an uneasy balance between the creative and destructive powers of nature, this ludic aesthetic conveyed the human ability to emulate the primordial metamorphic forces through scientific knowledge, technical ingenuity, and artistic skill. **(Fig. 21)** 



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 18: Bronze Doors of Hildesheim Cathedral, commissioned by Bishop Bernward in 1015 CE, Hildesheim, Germany

Fig. 19: Plan of the Monastery of Saint Gall in Switzerland, ninth century CE, drawing on parchment, 112 × 77.5 cm, St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex 1092, recto

Fig. 20: The Lover and Dame Oyseuse (Idleness) entering a walled garden, ca. 1490–1500 CE, illustration from the illuminated manuscript of *Roman de la Rose*, British Library, Harvey, MS, 4425, folio 12v

Fig. 21: Pietro Mati, Grotto installation (righthand side), 1584–85, Florence, Italy, Boboli Gardens, Buontalenti Grotto, entrance chamber

Gardens and Nature in Art

MUSEUM TOUR

Stephanie Caruso


Elizabeth Dospěl Williams

Juan Antonio Murro

Anatole Tchikine



Dumbarton Oaks' collections of medieval and early modern art are rich in representations of gardens, plants, and animals.

Comparing artworks across time periods and geography offers opportunities to consider the similarities and divergencies in how different cultures grappled with human beings' relationship to the natural world. Visitors can identify the following works in the galleries thanks to special labels. A map on the inside front cover of this booklet indicates the objects' locations for easy reference. 



1 | Sarcophagus with Representations of the Seasons

Late Roman, 330–335 CE

Marble

BZ.1936.65

Just as today time away spent in verdant, less populated places can rejuvenate city dwellers, for a Roman living in the frenetic landscape of a late antique city, nature imbued people with a promise of abundance and peace. The value Romans placed on nature in life was equal in death. Two means through which artists captured the theme of nature in Roman funerary art were depictions of seasonal and pastoral imagery. Personifications reflected the seasons changing on a fixed temporal schedule and gave Romans faith in the idea of an eternal cosmic order. Imagery of shepherds tending their flocks or harvesting wheat suggested an ideal existence in nature, removed from the struggles of city living. Interestingly, this sarcophagus combines both approaches to portraying nature. Four winged personifications of the seasons occupy the front side of the sarcophagus. In the spaces between their feet and below the central framed portrait of the deceased couple, the sculptor has included representations of shepherds, farmers, and putti harvesting grapes. The imagery on this sarcophagus thus reflects a deep appreciation for nature. Through the inclusion of both depictions of pastoral imagery and personifications of the seasons, the deceased could continue to enjoy the pleasures of nature into the afterlife. —SC





2 | Floor Mosaic with Hunting Scenes

Early Byzantine, late fifth to early sixth century

Mosaic

BZ.1938.74a & c

The theme of the hunt was ubiquitous in the homes of the late antique elites. Representations of hunting adorned silver plates, textiles, and floors, like this one from a house near the city of Antioch. With many of the hunters and animals facing different ways, the floor is designed so it can be read from numerous different perspectives within the room. Hunts could take place as games in the amphitheater, but the abstracted plants dispersed throughout the floor suggest that this hunt is taking place outside in nature. The scene depicted on this floor surely took place on the estate of a landowner, connecting interior decoration to activities outside the house. In this way, such imagery evokes the homeowner's wealth by illustrating his dominance over large-scale property. As is the case today, ownership of a second home in the countryside was a marker of prosperity and success at the time when this mosaic was created. In Late Antiquity, Antioch was one of the empire's most important city centers and this mosaic would likely have adorned the country home of someone who also had a residence in the city. —SC





3 | Mirror Back

Classic Veracruz, 300–600 CE

Slate

PC.B.050

Made of black slate, this object is considered the backing of a pyrite mirror. It depicts a long-haired man on one knee with his arms extended, an iconography typically used to portray players of the Mesoamerican ball game that connoted social, religious, and political power. The man is furthermore a high-status individual, an interpretation suggested by his stone necklace and ear spool, accessories exclusively seen on representations of rulers and gods. Lastly, his long hair tied in a knot and the depiction of a plant-like staff (perhaps representing maize) are identifying attributes associated with the Rain God or his impersonators. The Rain God is often represented holding vegetal, scrolled, or serpentine insignias; sometimes he is also represented with a bird scepter, like the avian represented on the top-right of the piece, near its edge, standing over the plant-scepter. The rain god, one of the most ancient and widespread deities of all Mesoamerica, had close connections with agriculture cycles, and the rituals held in his honor assured abundant rain during the growing season. —**JAM**





4 | Botanical Frog

Moche, 100-800 CE

Ceramic

PC.B.596

This supernatural creature, known as the Botanical Frog, combines frog, feline, and plant attributes. Frog elements are visible in the animal's face and body, as well as the round spot on its throat, while feline features include the forms of the legs and feet, as well as the horizontal stripes on the limbs. The creature also incorporates details that may represent the manioc or cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), including tubers that hang from the rear of the frog. The vertical ridges along the upper side of his body evoke the characteristic ridges along the stalk of the manioc plant. In addition, five lima beans suspended from a double-headed serpent function as a collar along his neck. The repeated occurrence of this frog being, also painted in fine-line Moche ceramics, suggest that this creature was an important supernatural figure in the Moche pantheon, perhaps related to agricultural or fertility rituals. The manioc plant had found its way leapfrogging from garden to garden from its origins in southwestern Amazonia to the coastal desert of northern Peru, where it formed a key crop in the fields and gardens of the Moche. —JAM





5 | April Tapestry

Flemish, Renaissance, ca. 1525–1528

Wool and silk on wool

HC.T.1930.07.(T)

Gothic and Renaissance European tapestries—intended to decorate the interiors of aristocratic homes—brim with carefully observed representations of plants and animals that bring elements of the outside world indoors. Dumbarton Oaks' tapestry takes the conceit further by foregrounding cosmic themes related to nature, seasonality, and time. At center, a stylishly dressed couple rides through a verdant springtime landscape on a stately horse. In the background at left, laborers work the land, while at right, a couple strolls through the landscape with their child. A lavishly adorned woman holding a basket in one hand and labeled *Flora*, classical goddess of flowers, observes the scene from her perch above the couple's head. The figures are set in a circular frame, topped by a representation of a bull—zodiac symbol for Taurus—identified in an inscription as the month of *April*. The circular frame is filled with celestial symbols set against a background that shifts from light to dark, with a sequence from one through twelve and twelve to one, expressing changes in sunlight over the course of a single day. Taken together, these details celebrate spring splendor, aimed at an elite audience interested in classical mythology and the allegorical relationship linking nature, the seasons, and the passage of time. This tapestry was furthermore one of a set of twelve, each representing a month, that would likely have been swapped out according to the owners' preferences or perhaps even following the changing months of the year. —EDW





6 | Death of St. Peter Martyr

Jacobello del Fiore, ca. 1380–1439

Italian, Early Renaissance, ca. 1428

Tempera on panel

HC.P.1922.01.(T)

Though the main subject of this painting is the murder of the thirteenth-century Italian saint Peter Martyr, the panel's artist demonstrates keen interest in flora and landscape. At center, the kneeling and bleeding Peter has fallen victim to two assassins. The figure at right holding a dagger gazes up to a glowing orb in the sky, from which emerge three divine crowns of martyrdom sent by God. The scene is set amidst a deep green garden, populated with densely growing fruit trees, bushes, and flowers. These detailed representations of floral motifs relate to the backgrounds of late medieval tapestries, which often included carefully observed representations of plants. For example, Jacobello has faithfully represented the leaves of a dandelion at the lower right corner just beneath the murderer's foot, along with pomegranate trees in the background. At the same time, the painting's rugged mountain landscape—topped at right with a heavily fortified town surrounded by a wall and moat—recalls stylized depictions in Byzantine manuscript and panel painting. The rendering of the natural world in this painting, in other words, is at once carefully observed while remaining highly artificial. The combination epitomizes the tensions present in early Renaissance concerns about faithfully depicting the world as it appeared to the artist, while also drawing from principles of representation inherited from earlier eras.

—EDW



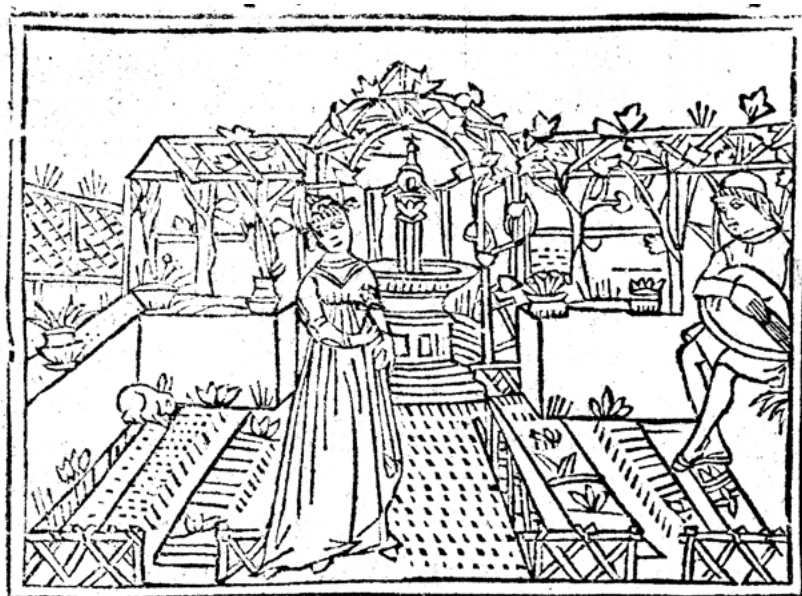


7 | Woodblock illustration showing a pleasure garden, *Il libro della agricultura*

Pietro de' Crescenzi

Venice, Matteo Capcasa, 1495

For medieval and early modern authors, such as Crescenzi, agriculture was not only a fundamental human occupation and a profitable investment, but a noble profession that accumulated centuries of collective experience of cultivating land and managing its resources. Divided into twelve books, the eighth of which was dedicated to pleasure gardens, his agricultural treatise combined the ancient practice of husbandry with later environmental knowledge gained through ongoing interaction with nature. Dating to the early decades of the fourteenth century and originally written in Latin, Crescenzi's book became popular through numerous Italian and French printed editions, one of the earliest of which, published in Venice in 1495, Mildred Bliss bought for Dumbarton Oaks in February 1961. The woodblock image of a pleasure garden—which shows a courting couple, the man playing a lute, within a low enclosure with parallel rows of planting beds and an arbor shading a fountain at the back—was used more than once throughout the text to cut down the production costs. —AT



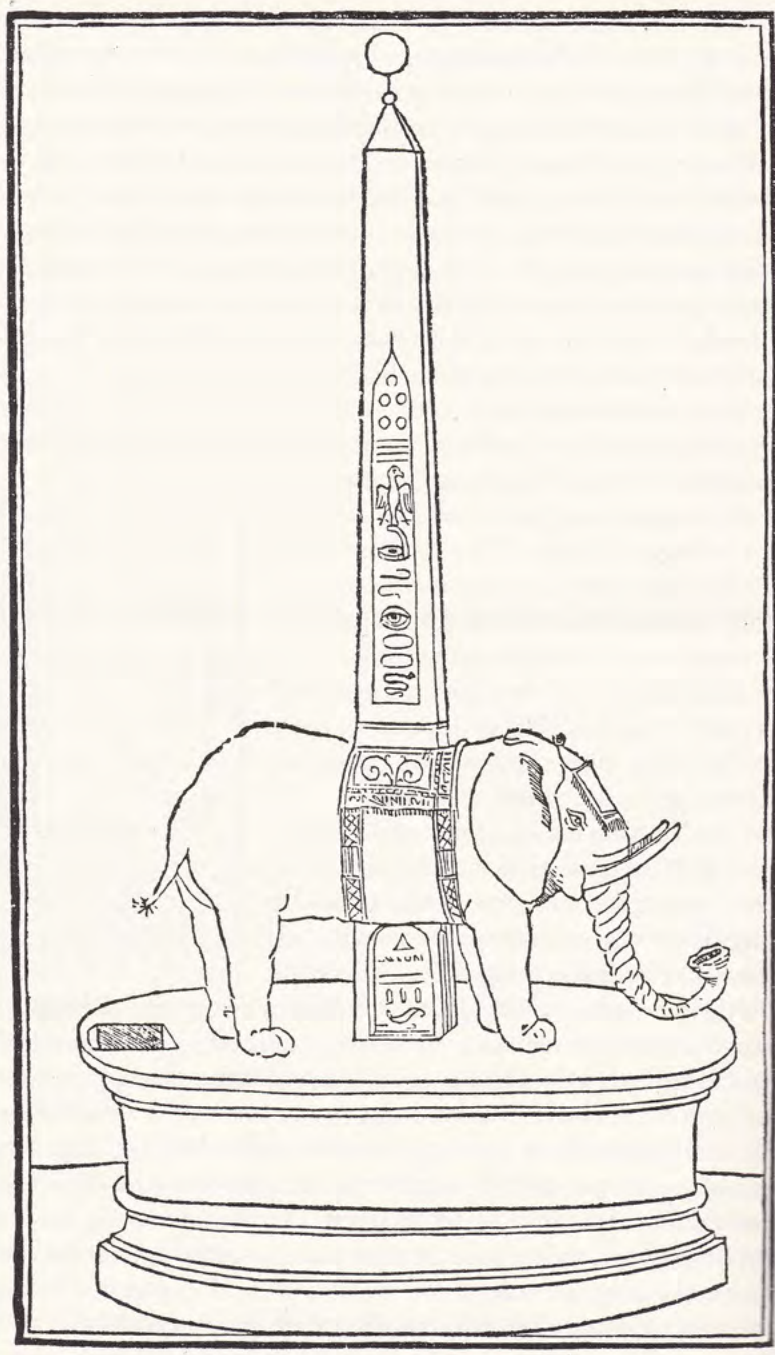


8 | Woodblock illustration of the Elephant Monument, *La Hypnerotomachia di Poliphilo*, second edition

Francesco Colonna

Venice, Figliuoli di Aldo, 1545

Built around a dream journey that culminated in a visit to the imaginary garden of Venus on the Island of Cythera, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* continued the medieval tradition of the *Roman de la Rose*, while also being a tribute to its age—an era engrossed in the legacy of classical antiquity. Written in archaized and flowery Italian that was supposed to ennoble the allegorical narrative, this bizarre text sought to bring to life the world of fantastic monuments and cryptic inscriptions animated by scenes of neopagan rituals. Although of little impact as a literary work—with the second, corrected, Italian edition appearing almost half a century after the original 1499 publication—the *Hypnerotomachia* became an influential source of ideas for garden design due to its evocative imagery and exquisite illustrations. The obsidian elephant with pseudo-hieroglyphic lettering that the protagonist, Poliphilo, encountered early on his journey would serve as inspiration for Gian Lorenzo Bernini's 1667 monument carrying an actual Egyptian obelisk outside the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome. —AT





Dumbarton Oaks and European Gardens

Anatole Tchikine



For Beatrix Farrand, the art of gardening was no less prestigious than those of painting and sculpture. She derived this notion in part from early modern horticultural theorists, such as the Frenchman Jacques Boyceau, but mostly from her beloved aunt, the novelist Edith Wharton, whose 1904 book *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* was instrumental in introducing the American audience to the garden culture of Europe.

Wharton's aesthetic sensibility and artistic judgment were coupled with a deep awareness of history that permeated the sites that she visited on her travels through Italy. (Fig. 22) When, in 1921, Farrand was invited by Mildred Bliss to create the Dumbarton Oaks gardens, she conceived of the outcome as a rich tapestry of European design traditions enhanced by lush North American vegetation, an important aspect of her artistic palette.



Fig. 22

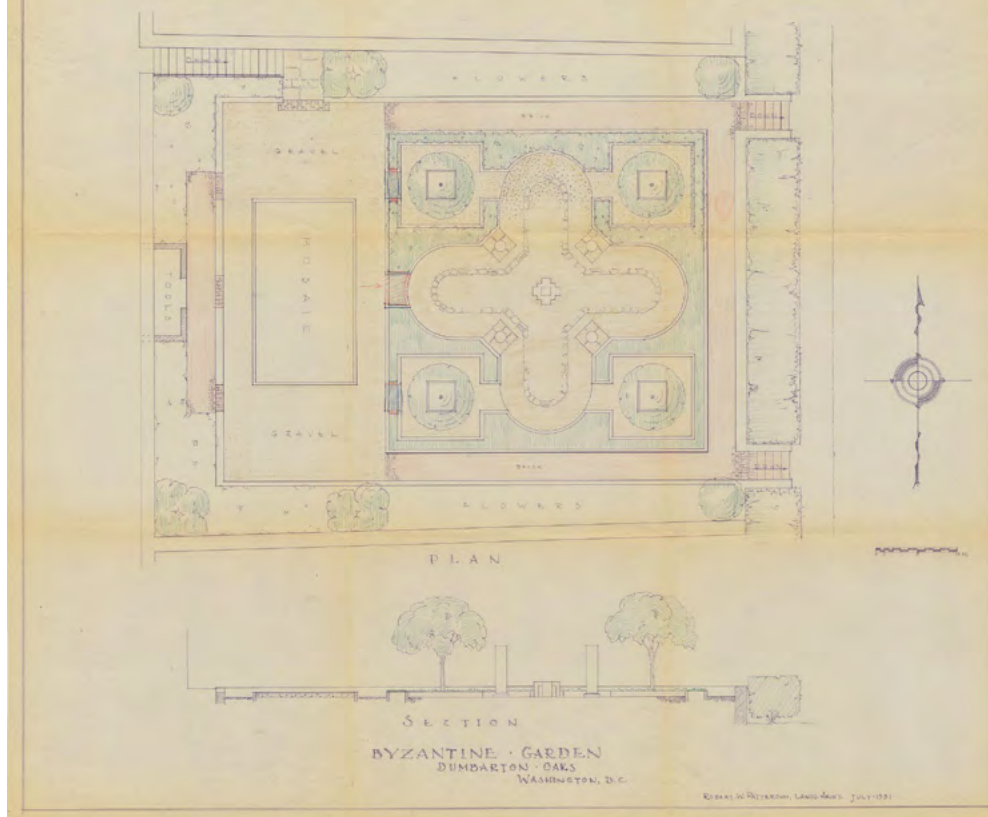


Fig. 23

If gardening was an art, the garden for Farrand was a place of learning about this centuries-old cultural heritage. Some of her designs drew inspiration from early printed European books or evoked specific locations popular with North American visitors. The pergola shading the Arbor Terrace, for example, derived from a print by the French Renaissance architect Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, showing a giant bower in the Château de Montargis; while the area around the Lovers' Lane Pool, shaped in the form of a theater, echoed the Bosco Parrasio, the eighteenth-century seat of the Accademia degli Arcadi in Rome. Bliss contributed to this historically informed vision her deep fascination with the world of Byzantium. In March 1952, she shared with Farrand the plan for a new cutting garden designed by the architect Robert W. Patterson that was to be "laid out like the Byzantine church," that is, in the shape of a Greek cross. (Fig. 23)



Fig. 24


A testimony to this absorbing passion for art and nature that united Wharton, Farrand, and Bliss, in which gardens played such a prominent part, is a small still life painting in the Dumbarton Oaks collection by the French Post-Impressionist artist Odilon Redon. Farrand's gift to the Blisses, it previously hung in her aunt's library of the Pavillon Colombe in Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt north of Paris. Wharton, who had bought this eighteenth-century house in 1918, died there in 1937. As Farrand wrote to Bliss in October 1946, Redon's painting was "associated with so many hours of waiting and watching by Edith during the last months of her life that I bought it from her French estate and have always destined it to you and Dumbarton. It is a deep happiness to know that you both like it and its association. Bless you my two for all the affection that lies between us and will till the end of time." (Fig. 24) 

Fig. 22: Maxwell Parrish, *Villa Gamberaia*, 1904, from Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (New York: The Century Co.)

Fig. 23: Robert W. Patterson, *Design for the Byzantine Garden*, July 1951, green, blue, red, and yellow colored pencil drawing, 67.6 × 78.2 cm, Dumbarton Oaks Garden Archives, LA-GD-F-2-02

Fig. 24: Odilon Redon (aka Bertrand-Jean Redon), *Vase of Flowers*, ca. 1866–68, oil on canvas, 28.58 × 19.05 cm, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, House Collection, HC.P.1947.14.(O)

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 and Place in Early Urban Societies*, edited by Andrew Creekmore and
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Photography

Captions and Credits

Pg. 2: *Woman in Court Dress*, ca. 1450-1475, wool on wool and linen, 87 × 66 in.,
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, HC.T.1912.03.(T)
© Dumbarton Oaks, House Collection, Washington, DC

Pg. 4: Tapestry with Animals and Flowers, ca. 1425-1450 CE, wool and silk
on wool and linen, 48 × 72 in., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and
Collection, HC.T.1913.04.(T) © Dumbarton Oaks, House Collection,
Washington, DC

Garden and Nature

Fig. 01: Mondatori Portfolio / Art Resource, NY

Fig. 02: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1911,
metmuseum.org

Fig. 03: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr.,
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Fig. 04: Photo © Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, 2009

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Gardens in Byzantium

Fig. 06: Photo © Peter Hess

Fig. 07: Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Fig. 08: ÖNB/Vienna, Cod. med. gr. 1 fol. 5v

Fig. 09: ÖNB/Vienna, Cod. med. gr. 1 fol. 138v

Gardens in the Americas

Fig. 10: Benson Latin American Collection (The University of Texas at Austin),
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Fig. 11: Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain* by Fray
Bernardino de Sahagún: *The Florentine Codex*, World Digital Library

Fig. 12: Photo © Shawn Harquail. Licensed under Creative Commons BY-NC 2.0.

Fig. 13: Photo © McKay Savage. Licensed under Creative Commons BY 2.0

Fig. 14: Theresa Vuillemin, "Water color reproductions of the herbs in the
Badianus Manuscript (Codex Barberini, Latin 241) Vatican Library: An
Aztec Herbal of 1552," Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC

Gardens in the Islamic World

Fig. 15: Photo © Micah Budway

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Fig. 17: Courtesy of The John Work Garrett Library, The Sheridan Libraries,
Johns Hopkins University

Gardens in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

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Fig. 20: Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *Roman de la Rose*. Licensed under
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Fig. 21: Photo © Anatole Tchikine

Gardens and Nature in Art

Tour 1: © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC

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Tour 3: © Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, DC

Tour 4: © Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, DC

Tour 5: © Dumbarton Oaks, House Collection, Washington, DC

Tour 6: © Dumbarton Oaks, House Collection, Washington, DC

Tour 7: Pietro de Crescenzi, *Il Libro Della Agricultura*, Dumbarton Oaks Research
Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC

Tour 8: Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a
Dream*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for
Harvard University, Washington, DC



Dumbarton Oaks and European Gardens

Fig. 22: Maxwell Parrish, *Villa Gamberaia*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC

Fig. 23: Robert W. Patterson, "Design for the Byzantine Garden," Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC

Fig. 24: © Dumbarton Oaks, House Collection, Washington, DC

Pg. 75: Bowl with Anthropomorphic Cacao Trees, 400–500 CE, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, PC.B.2018, © Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, DC

Pg. 77: Painting of Ducks and Plants in an Architectural Frame, first century CE, egg tempera on plaster, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 25 $\frac{5}{16}$ in., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, BZ.1935.14, © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC

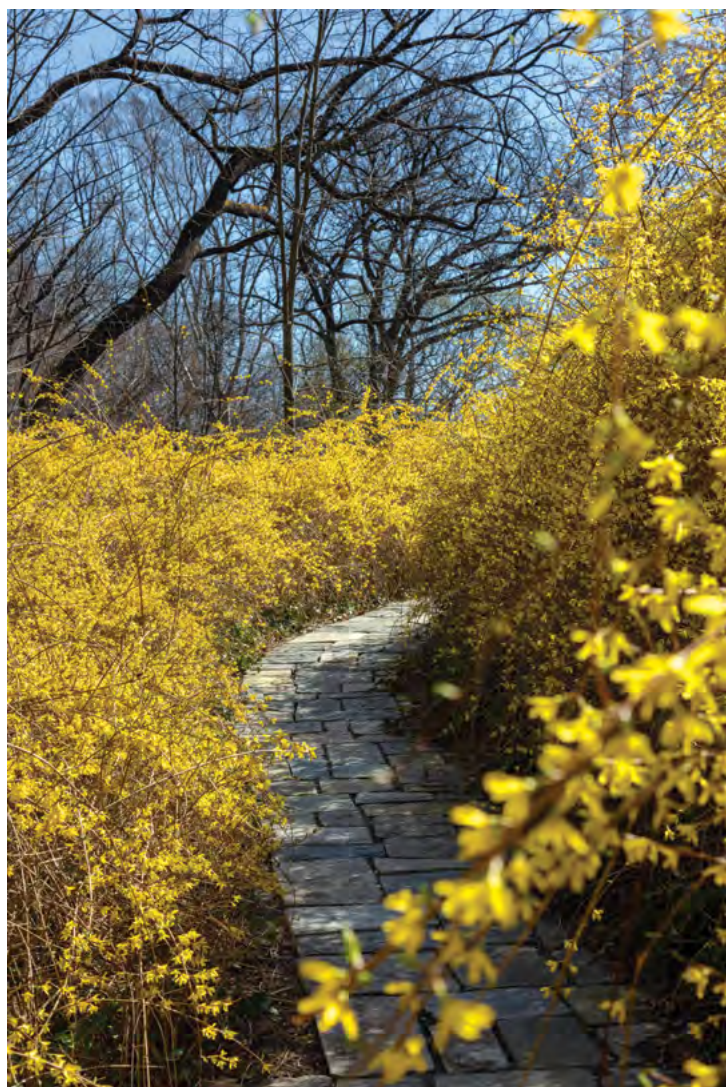
Pg. 78: Fragment of a Hanging, fifth century CE, tapestry weave in polychrome wool and undyed linen on plain-weave ground in undyed linen, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, BZ.1953.2.60, © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC

Pg. 80: Forsythia Dell, Dumbarton Oaks. Photograph by Sahar Coston-Hardy, 2021. © Dumbarton Oaks



Acknowledgments

This booklet and accompanying exhibition were organized to coincide with the Medieval Academy of America's annual meeting in Washington, DC, from February 23–26, 2023. The conference's theme of "internationalisms" provided an ideal opportunity for exploring medieval gardens and attitudes toward nature across cultures. The project is a unique coordination among the departments and specializations so well represented at Dumbarton Oaks, including the Museum, Byzantine Studies, Pre-Columbian Studies, Library, and Rare Books. We wish to thank the Director's Office, especially our Director, Tom Cummins, and Executive Director, Yota Batsaki, for supporting this project. We are grateful to Marlis Hinckley and Lihong Liu, 2021–2022 Dumbarton Oaks fellows, for bibliography and conceptual suggestions. In the Museum Department, we thank Ellen Richardson, Manager of Exhibitions and Designer, for her creativity in developing this experimental project and Peter Tsouras, Museum Exhibit Technician, for assistance in exhibition installation. Lizzie McCord provided excellent feedback to the text and offered crucial assistance with image rights, labels, and project organization. The exhibition booklet was designed with sensitivity by Christine Lefebvre.





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